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Did 'Lucy' have CIA connection?

Scientists trade charges over fossil finds

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Charges of CIA connections, scientific dirty tricks, slander campaigns and government cover-ups are clouding the circumstances surrounding the discovery in Ethiopia of the "Lucy" bones and other vital fossil clues to man's origin.

The National Science Foundation, which has approved millions of dollars in grants for projects there, has opened an investigation into the matter, sources indicate.

Meanwhile, a multi-nation expedition eager to search for more ancestral fossils has been turned back by the Ethiopian government under a ban on digging that could last a year or more.

Sen. Paul Tsongas, D-Mass., who helped get NSF money to store American-collected fossils in Ethiopia, said, "If the CIA has penetrated those scientific teams, it is like shooting yourself in the foot."

The impact is "disastrous" for U.S.-overseas scientific cooperation, he said in an interview. True or not, Tsongas said an investigation by the NSF "and-or Congress" is "appropriate" and he would "personally support" it.

An account of the dispute emerged during a press briefing last week sponsored by the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing Inc.

They came from Jon E. Kalb, 41, a geologist who helped pioneer the explorations in Northern Ethiopia in 1971. He worked there until 1978, when Ethiopia expelled him and dismantled his research mission.

Although some of the details have been known in the scientific community for years, this is the first time, Kalb said, he has made them public.

In a sometimes emotional and bitter two-hour discourse, Kalb claimed he was expelled from Ethiopia and was denied NSF funding after rumors circulated by rival scientists that he worked for the CIA.

J. Desmond Clark, an anthropologist closely involved in the work at the University of California at Berkeley, angrily called Kalb's claims "entirely erroneous" and part of a "long-time persecution complex."

The NSF, Kalb said, denies that the CIA rumors had anything to do with not funding him, an explanation he called "absolute unadulterated garbage."

Kalb gave the following description of events surrounding the Ethiopian explorations between 1973 and the present:

He and a French researcher, Maurice Taieb, had surveyed a vast area in a low-lying Ethiopian sector called the Afar Triangle. They invited other scientists to help explore the region, including Donald Johanson, who was to become famous as the discoverer of "Lucy," a fossilized skeleton of a human ancestor more than four million years old.

In the last few years, the Afar region has become the hottest source of fossil evidence about animal and human evolution.

Kalb said that he broke with Johanson after Johanson concealed the significance of an earlier hominid discovery from the rest of the expedition, so that he later could announce the discovery in a news conference.

His falling out with Johanson also had earlier roots in a series of sharp disagreements over the removal of fossils from Ethiopia and the exploitation of the region by foreign scientists.

In the next few years, a series of grant applications involving hundreds of thousands of dollars by Kalb and his colleagues to the National Science Foundation were rejected.

According to Kalb, one reason was that other scientists began circulating rumors that he was a CIA agent. He traces the rumors to rival scientists, to questions about the source of his research funds and — as the significance of the fossil site exploded —

to his insistence that Ethiopia and Ethiopian graduate students get a bigger share of research dollars and opportunities. "I was on everybody's hit list," he said.

Fred Wendorf, an anthropologist at Southern Methodist University who joined Kalb about 1975, said he did not believe the rumors were the main reason the grants were rejected, but were "peripherally damaging."

"They (the NSF grant reviewers) were nervous about it," Wendorf said in a telephone interview. "It was talked up rather heavily."

He said he believed the rumors, which eventually reached the Ethiopian government and resulted in Kalb's expulsion in 1978, sprang up among other scientists but were groundless.

At the science writers briefing, Kalb said that exploration rights to the fossil-rich area of the Middle Awash Valley, where he had worked for seven years, were immediately handed over to Berkeley's Clark by the Ethiopian government.

However, Clark said he was invited to begin work there by Wendorf, Kalb's colleague, and Wendorf confirmed this.